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ABSTRACT

Language learning is a form of cultural learning, and cultural learning embraces language learning. The goal of cultural learning is a continuing search for understanding that bridges cultures. Language can be a bridge, a system that constructs reality as it communicates about reality. Education in the U.S. has tended to define culture as American culture, and so has institutionalized ethnocentrism. To change this approach, significant reforms in teaching are needed: (1) language teachers should no longer call their subject foreign, because this practice engenders prejudice; (2) teachers need more substantial training in semantics, kinesics, proxemics, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, and communications theory; (3) literature should be learned as culture rather than as criticism; (4) meaning must be combined with grammar, and function with form; (5) language teaching must take into account that the American university model of knowledge and authority may not correspond to that of other countries; and (6) methods and materials should be more geared to what is current and real in other countries. (MSE)

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Using Culture to Teach Languages

Henry Feguson

"Using culture to teach language" is the topic listed against my name on the program. I had thought it was "using language to teach culture." The difference appears profound, but the more I put my mind to it, the less able I have been to establish a clear pedagogical distinction between the two challenges.

I am a social scientist, trained as a scholar of social and economic history. My principal experience has been in India where I have studied modern administrative systems and the values that affect them. Concentrating on values leads you very close to the heart of a culture, and indeed I do believe I caught the beat of India's cultural pulse. But as I cannot effectively separate values from culture, so I cannot separate language from culture. Language is the unique vehicle of culture. Culture without language is animal behavior; language without culture is inconceivable.

We must, I feel, regard language learning as a form of cultural learning, and the opposite as well: cultural learning must embrace language learning.

Working from this hypothesis, however, my observations have led me to conclude that we don't do very well teaching culture in a language learning context nor teaching language in a culture-learning context.

First, I believe our academic social disciplines have certain fundamental constraints that make them inadequate for effective cultural learning. The contemporary social sciences emerged from modern western cultures. When I pursued field research on district administration in India and the values which affected its conduct, I discovered that the questions I drew up from my training as a social scientist and the analytical devices I used so facily were inappropriate to the cultural context in which I was operating. While tipping my hat to the anthropologists who attempt so diligently to avoid biasing their observations from their own cultural perspective, I believe that a quantum physics applies to all social sciences: the observation of the observer itself changes the nature of the reality. Thus the closer the student could get to conditioning his observations to the culture under scrutiny, and the closer the exposition of those observations to the native

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expression of the culture, the more reliable and accurate the study may seem. We are satisfied by the appearance of reality.

I am afraid that the reality of the American school or college curriculum, however, makes it unlikely that such reliability can be achieved and transmitted to students of other cultures. The vocabulary of the social sciences and the social studies is western, the process of scholarship is largely an American cultural phenomenon. The conversion of observations of a non-Western culture into this vocabulary inevitably distorts its reality. Thus I believe that our social sciences as they are presently conducted are disqualified from teaching culture. I hasten to add that I believe it well within the range of human grasp to rearrange our curriculum and our teaching and learning methods to achieve effective cultural learning.

As a cross-cultural trainer between my days of field research in India and my present position as an administrator, I sought to achieve more pertinent and effective cultural learning through use of structured experiences. The expository fashion of most American education barely scratches the surface of a culture and provides no effective checks on ethnocentric perceptions, especially use of stereotypes. The experiences I have worked with have been both of the contrast-American and the culture-specific variety, but in both methods the goal was to help a person crawl inside a culture other than his or her own and to perceive it as closely as possible on its own terms, from its own perspective. In such an approach, it is much more difficult to separate out what is language-learning and what is social science. Only the motives and the specialized goals of the language scholar or the social scientist would create a separation between language and culture in this kind of learning.

In my view, the goal of cultural learning is a continuing search for understanding that bridges cultures: my culture, thy culture, our culture, their culture. Language can be a bridge. If language learning is a barrier, overcome it. The artificial separation of the disciplines of language and linguistics on the one hand and the social sciences on the other may well be one of the more formidable obstacles to cultural learning.

Are we teaching language in our "language" instruction? If we were indeed teaching language, we would be serving the goal of cultural learning. There

is clear evidence that we are not teaching language. We are teaching speech. Or we are teaching literature.

Speech is an act or a process (Hymes, 1961). Speech is transmission of a message. Speech is observable behavior. That is why it is so easy to teach.

Language, on the other hand, is a structure, a pattern, a system. Language is a coding system. Language is a set of habits. Language is not only words, it is motion, gesture: proxemics and kinesics--where you stand and how you gesture at each other.

Language is particularly a system of encoding and decoding perceptible reality and abstractions. Abstractions assume reality only in language and in art. Language, to use Spradley's conception (1979), is a tool for constructing reality, not for merely communicating about reality. Yet in our language teaching, it seems to me an outsider whom I suppose can be critical, that we are teaching communication about reality rather than use of language for constructing reality. Different languages create and express different realities, alternative patterns for ways of thinking and perceiving that are shared by members of that culture.

Thus, to quote Brislin and Pedersen (1976), "Knowing a little of the foreign language may allow a person to make a 'fluent fool' of himself if he is unaware of the implicit meanings behind those symbols." And yet, in listening to the discussions today, both formal and informal, I have a feeling we've been spending too much time and effort on the symbols and not on the meanings behind the symbols.

Those meanings are approachable only if we penetrate behind speech and learn language. Language is the vehicle culture, culture is the burden for the language vehicle.

Let us define culture. I have collected definitions of culture for years. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) collected one hundred and sixty definitions. At this point, I have many more than that. Here are a few samples:

Culture is the daily living and value system of a people. (Morain, 1983)

Culture is the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior. (Spradley, 1979)

Culture is the man-made part of the environment. (Herskovits, 1955)

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Taylor, 1871)

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952)

Edward T. Hall, who happens to be a hero of mine, said in his brilliant book, Beyond Culture (1977): culture is ". . . not innate, but learned; the various facets of culture are interrelated--you touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected; it is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups."

I heard that B. F. Skinner (who is not a hero of mine) said that culture is "man-enclosed time and space." A pretty nifty definition when you think about it. (Alas, I do not have a citation for this.)

My own definition comes from my experience in South Asia. I believe that the Sanskrit word, dharma, accurately expresses what we mean by "culture." Dharma means law, custom, tradition, ritual. It is the only Sanskrit word which comprehends what we mean by "religion."

But it is also the word for "fate," "destiny." You are what you are. You are the product and the creature of your dharma. Dharma provides your own identity in the culture, and your only identity in the culture because dharma is associated with your family, your extended kin-group, which is by definition a religious, value-oriented group.

In American education generally, we have tended to deal with only a small part of culture, and if you look at the curriculum even in our new New York State syllabus, we really don't touch non-American cultures to any really great extent. The new 9th and 10th grade social studies framework is Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe. But really that's the only place in thirteen years of school where we really give kids an exposure to cultures other than the American and the Western European, except insofar as some rubs off in our language learning contexts. (But let's face it, most

precollegiate languages are European except for a smattering of Central or South American material in Spanish language courses.) Worse, most history teachers cut it off in 1945 before the Third World gained independence. Maybe they get up to the Cuban missile crisis, but for all intents and purposes, we're leaving out everything that's happened in the world in the last 20, 30, 40 years when Europe and America began to admit Asian and African nations to share world hegemony.

Incredible but true. We teach American culture as culture. Small wonder our students can't recognize their ethnocentrism.

If you take a fuller description of culture, like that of Harry Triandis, and examine how well we address this kind of culture learning, you'll see how short our instruction falls. Triandis (1983) says of culture:

It has both objective elements (tools, roads, pots) and subjective elements (norms, roles, values). It has structure (different elements are systematically related to each other) and function (it makes survival of humans more probable). Culture is one of the most important ways in which humans have adapted to the environment.

He goes on to identify the elements of culture:

- patterns of dress
- use of particular technologies and inventions
- methods of economic activity
- patterns of social interaction
- patterns of educating the young
- patterns of decision making and conflict resolution
- beliefs and behaviors related to regulating the place humans have in the universe
- behaviors that produce aesthetic satisfactions
- behaviors that increase understanding--that is philosophy
- behaviors that are required in communication

Just look at that list and see if we overtly and consciously--much less conscientiously--teach about much more than Triandis' objective elements. We learn vocabulary about dress and technologies (rooms, buildings, roads) and at least an everyday level of economic activity (markets) and, to a certain but limited extent, we do focus on patterns of social interaction. For the most part we leave out childrearing and education. We don't deal with decision

making or conflict resolution, cosmology, philosophy, belief and communication in the broad sense. We tend, in short, to deal with accidents of culture, not substance.

Thus we produce students who really know too little of the language and too little of the culture to function effectively on either a personal or professional level when they are in that particular linguistic or cultural context. When we ship them to Francophone Africa, they are lost. We do not equip them to know or to deal with the "meta-messages" such as those conveyed by proximity or gesture.

Moreover, because we concentrate upon speech, we tend to perpetuate stereotypes and preconceptions, in spite of our very best intention to dispel them.

One of the curious, paradoxical aspects of culture of course, is that we are ourselves creatures of our own culture. We have to break out of that culture. Or, to use Hall's title Beyond Culture, we have to rise above our own culture and see our culture through the eyes of other peoples in order to be able to understand it, just as we must first look in the mirror to be able to know how we look. I have said for years and years that you have to crawl inside another culture and experience it on its own terms in order to be able even to develop a basic empathy.

Empathy is a very misunderstood English word which does not mean: "Hey, those people are great!" It means projecting my personality, my ego, into another's and coming to understand how that other ego looks at its social and physical environment.

In conjunction with this, I should add that, from my experience with secondary school and undergraduate students, our two biggest problems are what I call the "Ho Hum" and "Yuk" syndromes.

The Ho Hum Syndrome is sheer apathy. They don't give a damn. And the Yuk Syndrome is: "Mom, what are we doing here at this Chinese restaurant when McDonald's is right next door?" We have to (a) motivate children suffering from these syndromes and (b) break them free from the prejudices and stereotypes which Judith Torney's work has illustrated are well established by the junior high years and other evidences that they are in place by the time kids enter kindergarten.

We have to begin to deal, in American language teaching, with something more than word equivalencies. We must deal with different ways of regarding and understanding reality. In fact, in a well-intentioned effort to introduce language learning to social studies materials, a unit of the State Education Department prepared a nice little table of word equivalencies between English, Italian, Spanish, French and German (Families, 1979). Fortunately, the list confined itself to Christian names and concrete objects and avoided abstractions like love, marriage, happiness and, indeed, family itself. This perpetuates the notion that all you have to do is to take an English word and convert it into a French word and there you've got it. Take "love." Take "family." If you take family in India, it doesn't just mean Mom, Pop and two kids. It means three to five generations living together, maybe with three or four different hearths but under one roof.

How about happiness? I've got to tell you a story: some big, high powered American media people went to India under a U.S. AID contract to work up a slogan for selling family planning. They worked very hard on this and finally laid it out for the Indians: "OK, here it is. 'A small family is a happy family.' Now translate that into Hindi." The Indians laughed and laughed because the translation would be "Chota ghar barra ghar hota hai"--or "A small family is a big family." The only phrase in Hindi that expresses what we Americans convey by "happiness" is "big family."

Equivalencies are insidious because they make students feel that all they have to do is learn new code words for familiar objects and ideas, when what they must really learn is the coding system.

For example, the Hindi word for "tomorrow" is kal, an easy equivalency. Alas, the word kal is also the Hindi word for yesterday. The words for the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow are the same. How do you know the difference? Only by tense. It also tells you more about how it's difficult to get decisions made in Indian bureaucracy than any other single cultural feature I can cite. And if you explore deeper into the subtleties of Hindi and related languages, you'll discover that the logical system is not European: it has no law of the excluded middle. There is no sense of contradiction between a thing or idea and its opposite. Take that to the Planning Commission, and I ask you how they make decisions? Buried in the

culture and in the language is an inability to recognize a decision crisis. If you don't understand this, you're going to be as frustrated as are most American businessmen and women who go to India.

What is important is the cultural construct of time which reflects an utterly foreign approach to reality from our own. Can we demolish preconceptions of India by merely teaching the equivalence? Tenses and comparative tenses tell a lot about concepts of time. Or do we need to go into the culture? We need rather to have the culture pervade what we convey as culture-specific (emic) or as universal (etic).

For the most part, aside from a few values like the sacredness of most human life, values tend to be emic rather than etic. And values determine norms and norms govern behavior. Therefore, the job of the cross-cultural trainer like myself is to try to lead an American to an understanding of a larger part of the set of norms of the other culture so that when they get there they are able to avoid misinterpreting the motives of the other person and the norms that influence the other person's behavior.

Furthermore, we fail to limit or eliminate approval or disapproval to the content of communication from other cultures. We must break out of the inevitable ethnocentric and linguacentric box reflected in: "Everyone has an accent except me," which reflects a very basic attitude toward the world.

Finally, we don't really come to grips with the reality that a high level of personal anxiety surrounds cross-cultural communications where the experience--and the attitudinal composition of the experience--are unfamiliar (Brislin, 1976). We must, ourselves, learn more about the students' motivations and attitudes.

To solve these problems, we should attempt to help the student achieve a sense of personal security, even a feeling of belonging, when moving among speakers of another language. In particular, we must try to minimize the American student's ambivalence in response to unfamiliar social cues particularly on matters of responsibility, authority, autonomy.

These efforts require that we see the students' language and cross-cultural experience as a dimension of their own growth, avoiding the shoals of alienation on the one hand and retreat from a real situation on the other. We must delicately help the students to grow into their own identity

as members of their own culture while at the same time learning how to establish appropriate cognitive and emotional relationships within another culture. And we have to make a lot more effort to make certain that what they have learned can be applied in their own culture and language.

So we start with a values problem and end with a values problem. If a culture has its own inherent system of coherence and logic and everyone is to some extent a product of his or her own culture, then how can we both be ourselves and understand others (Brislin, 1976, p. 15)? The values and basic features of American culture are obvious, taken for granted by our students. But for cross-cultural learning, this is precisely the point: because our own values are so familiar, we get into difficulties when we try to live in another culture where the sun still comes up in the morning and sets at night (Brislin, 1983).

It is no matter of speech. It is a matter of language, of culture. We need, therefore, some significant reforms in teaching.

First, our language teachers should not call their subject "foreign" any more, a term which automatically engenders prejudice against language.

Second, language teachers need more substantial training in semantics, kinesics, proxemics, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, communications theory. This implies a strong movement away from language as literature.

Third, where literature is learned, it should be learned as culture rather than as criticism. We must extract the realities that lie behind words, the emic rather than naive assumption that all is etic (Loew, 1984).

Fourth, meaning must be combined with grammar. Ask what functions are performed (not "why") by such things as: different "you" forms, permissibility of double negatives, use of reflexives where they don't seem to be needed, declensions and inflections, genders of words.

Fifth, finally, we must make a real effort to anticipate the real world where the university model is perhaps inappropriate. Take the Americans in Francophone Africa where knowledge is history, not something you look up in the library or find in the lab; where authority is not the elected official whose name and vita are in the Blue Book, but the patriarch of an extended family or clan; where who you know is much more important than what you know; where truth is not necessarily the rationally derived conclusion from

analyzing evidence; where meta-messages are more important than words; where oral communication is much more authoritative than the written word. Yet our universities and our schools don't teach that way. They teach that you look it up in a book, the professor's got the answers, the textbook has it all, and truth is what you end up with.

Finally, we've got to give an eye to our methods and materials. We need more use of satellite interconnects between nations, more use of interactive video, marrying the television with the computer, more attention to the contents of our textbooks. Look at a typical textbook on Central America. What do you see? Five pictures: siesta, fiesta, gun-toting guerrillas, a tinpot dictator and a great white ship loading bananas for your breakfast table. That's the kind of reality we are purveying and it's that kind of "reality" that we have to demolish in both our culture and language learning.

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